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## The Dividing Line

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## THE DIVIDING LINE

ONE DAY COLIN was being fitted for his tuxedo, and the next, he was in emergency surgery. The day after that, Beth helped him walk down the hospital's hallway. His gait was awkward, and he listed toward her. Beth wondered if the loss had affected his equilibrium, the way you could throw a cat off-balance by snipping off its whiskers on one side. A few nights later, he lay naked in bed as she directed the reading lamp like a spotlight above him. The incision, sewn with brown thread, ran along the diagonal crease of skin where his briefs normally stretched -- she had bought him some loose-fitting boxers for the time being. The right side was withered, tender and pink, and she patted it lightly.

"Okay," Colin said, touching Beth's arm.

"Sorry," she said.

"It's just that it's a little sore."

"I'm sorry."

Everyone said it was good that they had the wedding preparations to keep them busy while they waited for the test results. Beth took her bridesmaids to lunch and postponed their Italian honeymoon indefinitely. *I'm sorry things didn't work out*, the nasal-voiced woman at Marshall Field's said when she asked to cancel their gift registration. No, Beth said, *no, no -- I'm still getting married*. *It's just that my fiance might have cancer, and we think we'll need money instead*. Her eyes misting behind broad glasses, the saleswoman hugged Beth and pressed a ten-dollar bill into her hand. As she staggered toward the Frango mints counter, the money balled in her fist, Beth wondered at her rush to correct the woman. Was it pity she was seeking? Or did she imagine that having a fight and calling off the wedding would be a worse fate than finding out that Colin was sick? And why did no one— not her parents, friends, nor Colin— suggest she might change her mind about

the wedding? Their silence felt conspiratorial, calculated to keep her on track.

Colin was officially diagnosed two days before the wedding: Stage II testicular cancer, a ninety percent cure rate with chemotherapy. Beth held his hand in the doctor's office and then in the car as he drove in slow loops through their new neighborhood. Neither of them could remember their new address, or even what the building looked like; friends had supervised the move that day. It was their first home together, and Beth knew that any psychologist would point out that they weren't ready to go there. She saw the apartment first—saw their boxes and empty bookcases illuminated for a slow moment by a bare bulb in a freshly painted, curtainless room—but she let it pass by until, ten minutes later, they rounded the block again.

On their wedding day, when Beth took her place beside Colin and smiled, he grimaced and let his gaze trail off toward the priest. He rocked from foot to foot, tense in his tux, and Beth could tell he was thinking not about how lovely she was in her expensive dress but about the crowd gathered behind him: two hundred people pondering his embarrassing illness. Beth realized then that she should have postponed the wedding. They could deal with cancer or they could deal with marriage, but both at the same time? It was ridiculous.

And yet: Here they were.

So she gripped Colin's chin and jerked it down. Me, she mouthed, *Look at me*. At the reception, Colin's mother complimented Beth on the move, insisting that something drastic had been required to focus her son's attention. *Why wouldn't he be distracted?* Beth heard an uncle of Colin's say from across the table. *Imagine signing a living will the same week as your marriage license!*

In the week between the wedding and the first round of chemo, Beth drove Colin to the sperm bank for daily deposits, in case the drugs left him infertile. Unable to sit still in the waiting room, she wandered down the block to a Catholic church. Finding a Bible in the pew, she took it as something left especially for her. Each day while Colin was in the sperm bank, Beth brought her new Bible to the church and read passages at random. She prayed, rambling internal monologues that started on the topic

of Colin's health and ended as grocery lists or speculation about her co-workers' sex lives.

They made love often that week, a different kind of insurance: The drugs might rob Colin of his desire for her; the drugs might not work at all. At least they would have this passionate, wearying week to look back on. In bed, Beth felt for new lumps, wishing she had found the first one herself, before the dull pain began.

At lunch time during Colin's first five-day chemo session, Beth walked to the hospital from the cultural center where she worked and ate a sandwich at his bedside while the fluid trickled into his veins. She envied the easy rapport his nurses, Sylvia and Jacklyn, had with their patient. Colin had always been reserved, but now he was almost silent when they were alone, and easily distracted. Beth grew quiet too. Their usual pattern was for him to tease her as she talked out everyday anxieties and minor decisions. Now the things that riled her seemed obscenely petty, impossible to mention.

They took a cab home on the fifth day, and Colin leaned on Beth as they walked up the sidewalk. She filled a bath for him and stroked him with a soapy cloth, sloughing away clumps of hair that drifted on the water's skin. Afterward, Colin shaved his head. Beth helped him with the back, then rubbed a pine-scented lotion into his tender pink scalp with her palms. She pressed him against the sink, gripped his smooth skull and kissed him.

His head lolled back and he smiled slightly.

"No?" Beth said.

"I'm sorry," he said, and yawned.

That night Beth awoke to feel Colin touching her, one hand kneading her breasts, the other rubbing her thigh. She sighed, warming sleepily to the attention. But as soon as she turned toward the embrace, his hands slid away and he rolled over. The back of his head faced her blankly from his pillow. A few nights later, when she felt his hands on her again, Beth didn't stir. He was gentle, so gentle, fingers like feathers. His chest was warm against her back. When he was done, they lay very still. Then Beth turned and he curled into her. She touched him, her fingers loosening strands of hair.

While sitting in the hospital waiting room during Colin's sec-

ond round of treatment, Beth opened her Bible at random to the story of Elijah in Kings:

"And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head.

And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them."

Alone in their bed that night, Beth dreamt that she was running in a bear suit, chased by a pack of naked little boys, their skin glistening red like the inside of a mouth, genitals dangling like tonsils. She awoke sweating and, seeing the smooth globe of a full moon outside the window, thought it might be Colin's head projected from the hospital into the sky. *Thou Bald Head, Thou Bald Head, I should never have married you.* She stifled a cry, understanding then that even religion could turn sour and mocking.

They joined a TC couples support group that met in the basement of the hospital on Tuesday nights. The husbands and wives were young and angry, earnest and joyous. They cursed and praised God; they made horrible puns. *What a nutty disease!* Beth was awed by these couples, who were scarcely older than she and Colin, yet free from shame and decorum. Some of them admitted openly that they had not had sex of any kind in months. Others were trying without success to get pregnant. *If I only had the balls, I'd quit radiation right now.* Colin did not share his feelings with the group, but took on a valued role as the TC expert. He searched medical journals and the Internet and displayed home-made graphs about drugs, reoccurrence, and impotence on an overhead projector. In his presentations, Colin reassured the group that with time, they would probably all have healthy sex lives. Beth wanted to raise her hand and ask: *What's healthy?* But no one else asked, and Colin didn't say.

After four months, the chemo ended, and they waited for the results. Colin began working mornings at his old job in financial software. In the afternoon he slept, sometimes not waking until morning. Some nights he woke Beth, stroking, rubbing.

"When is this going to stop?" she asked once, turning to face him.

His hands retreated. "I thought you understood. Sex is different for me now."

"Now, meaning for how long?"

"I don't know. It's not something I can say."

She placed his hand on her hip. "I don't understand," she said. "What's wrong with this?" She began to cry, not knowing if she was truly sad or just being manipulative.

When Colin patted her shoulder in a perfunctory manner that put her in mind of a despised ex-boyfriend, Beth shut herself in the bathroom. She took a shower and then stood, dripping, on the lip of the tub, staring at herself in the mirror. Her skin's pink shimmer made her feel haughty, then aroused. Back in bed, she touched herself while Colin lay still beside her.

On a Friday afternoon in September, they sat in the doctor's office and listened to him say that Colin was cured: The cancer was gone. Beth began to cry, and her crying became great gasping sobs, then laughter that edged into hysteria and hiccups. While the doctor fetched her a glass of water, Colin smiled tentatively, eyes darting, as if he suspected the good news, or perhaps the entire ordeal, was just a mean-spirited joke.

The next morning, Beth rescheduled their honeymoon. They had decided on Italy more than a year ago, when Colin had been considering graduate school in archaeology and wanted to see Rome. Now Beth suspected he would just as soon stay at home. Nevertheless, she was determined to get them out of Chicago for a couple of weeks. The trip would be the dividing line between his illness and their marriage. Everything had been jumbled together, hopelessly intertwined, but in Italy they would leave the cancer behind. Before they left, Beth walked through the apartment with a garbage bag, tossing out reminders of Colin's illness: extra-soft children's toothbrushes, pots of lip balm, TV Guides, spreadsheets of dosage schedules. She wanted all of it to be gone when they came home.

On the ferry ride to Venice, Beth held Colin's shoulders as he leaned, shaking, against the railing. The doctor had warned them that travel might aggravate Colin's fatigue and nausea, and Beth took the seasickness as a personal rebuke: She was pushing him too fast into recovery. They had a reservation at a pensione

overlooking the Rialto Bridge, but lugging Colin and their suitcases onto another boat was unthinkable, and so she checked them into a modest hotel near the train station. As she watched Colin doze off, the room's fluorescent lighting, tile floors, and aluminum bed made Beth feel as if they were back in an American hospital. At least his hair was beginning to grow back; dark pinpricks pushed at the scalp.

Colin grunted and rolled over the next morning when she tried to rouse him for breakfast, so Beth set off into the city alone. It was gray and windy in Venice, and she scuttled over bridges and through narrow passageways in her black rain slicker. She walked without a map, brushing by other late-season tourists, pausing to watch gondoliers steer through the choppy dark water, their passengers bundled in hooded jackets, hunched over cameras. Colin did not like being lost, she recalled. She was glad to be alone, free from his lethargy and boredom. She sat at the edge of a fountain with an egg-salad sandwich and watched Italian women in tweed suits and silk scarves leading their children into a school. She leafed through her Bible and read:

"Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.

Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate."

She thought of the frightening red children who chased her in a dream months ago. At the time she thought they were the cancer itself, but now she saw them as the children they might not be able to have — or might no longer want. She and Colin would have to discuss children. Other issues, too. Sex, for instance. She stood up. Now that he was well, she could assert herself again.

He was still asleep when she returned to the room at dinnertime. The next morning it was Beth who stayed in bed, feeling drugged and disoriented. In the mid-afternoon she wandered around the little souvenir market looking for Colin, then gave up and took a boat to an island on the other side of the



canal. She found a church, and sat in the cool, near-darkness before a shrine featuring a porcelain doll dripping with gold-embroidered robes, rhinestones and lace. Beth prayed to the doll, asking it to help her have a good vacation with Colin, to help them grow closer. She resolved to have a romantic evening with her husband. She would order a bottle of wine at dinner; Colin was allowed to drink again, and his tolerance would probably be low.

As she was walking back to the hotel, she saw him standing in the sidewalk by the souvenir stands, gesturing to a policeman. Colin looked like an alien, pale and elongated. *He lost his wallet*, Beth thought, and ducked behind a jewelry stand. Her shaking fingers trailed through strands of glass beads. She paid for one without noticing its color and stuffed it in her pocket. When she emerged, the policeman was gone. Colin stood with his arms folded across his chest in the middle of the sidewalk, oblivious to the tourists winding around him.

"Hi," Beth said, tapping his shoulder from behind.

He whirled around. "My wallet was stolen," he said.

"Oh no! Where?"

"I got pickpocketed, on a boat, I think. I went out to this island and when I came back, I went to buy some postcards and my wallet was gone."

"I went to an island, too." She wondered whom he was planning to send postcards to. His nurses, maybe, or members of the support group.

"Fuck," he said, hands braced behind his head, walking in slow circles.

"That's awful, Colin," Beth said belatedly, watching her husband with detachment. She imagined he had been an ideal target for a young Italian boy-- there could be no one in Venice more sickly looking or oblivious to his surroundings than Colin. She was annoyed with him for being robbed, and for letting it bother him. She thought suddenly of his surgery, how the doctor had reached in and taken part of Colin, how resigned he had been, they both had been, to the necessity of such a strange, brutal act.

That night they ate dinner at a seafood restaurant overlooking a dank canal. They dug into a huge plate of shellfish with their hands, sucking out the tender meat, dripping juice onto the



tablecloth. Beth kept their wineglasses full. Colin's eyes grew glazed and he held her hand across the table, stroking her palm with his thumb.

"Maybe now our honeymoon can really start," she said.

"Maybe," he said. Their fingers laced, tacky with oil, and Beth played absently with Colin's ring. He bent over the band as if seeing it for the first time. He stared at Beth, his eyes pulsing with tears. "I love you," he said, his hand grazing her cheek. "My wife."

In their hotel room Colin's thin body spread over her, his hands darting feverishly, almost spastic. When Beth reached between his legs, he clutched her wrist and guided it away. He pushed against her, but not in her, and soon he was done, lying inert on top of her.

She awoke in the night and found herself alone. In the hallway, threads of light framed the door of the communal bathroom. She stood there for a moment, trying to identify the soft scraping sound coming from inside.

"Colin?" she whispered. "Is that you?"

He opened the door and looked at her distractedly. His head was lathered with soap and he was holding a razor. The sink was filled with foam dotted with stubble.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Fine," he said.

"Colin, why are you shaving?" She thought she sounded like a child trying to understand some puzzling aspect of ordinary adult behavior.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you shaving your hair just when it's starting to grow in again?"

"I got used to it this way," Colin said, and gently closed the door.

In Rome, Colin drifted behind Beth at the Forum, showing no interest as she read from their guidebook and pointed at arches connecting nothing, columns supporting invisible buildings. So when he suggested they go to the Catacombs, Beth quickly mapped the bus route and got them there within the hour. It was cooler in the countryside, though the scenery was almost tropical, low palms shading the stucco tourist information cen-

ter and the other outbuildings. Colin and Beth joined a clump of people waiting for the final tour of the day beside a sign that read "ENGLISH SPEAKING." A group of elderly Americans gathered around a man in a priest's collar and cardigan who was passing out supper chits. "One at a time, now," he said in an easy drawl. An elderly Indian nun led them inside a building and then down a steep stone staircase. The tour leader hung back, letting his group pass ahead of him, and Colin and Beth followed behind.

As they descended the narrow steps, the nun told them that there were four levels of underground catacombs, twenty kilometers filled with half-a-million tombs that had contained the remains of early Christians. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, robbers pried off the tile slabs and looted the tombs.

She led them single file down a tight passageway. The barren tombs, hollowed out of tan volcanic rock, lined both sides from floor to ceiling like uneven bookshelves.

"You will notice how little the tombs are," the nun said. She was at the far end of the long passageway, but her voice carried through the tunnel. "Many children were buried here, and the adults were smaller then."

"Where y'all from?" the priest asked, smiling at Beth.

"Chicago," she said. "How about y'all?" She felt Colin's eyes on her.

"Louisville. We're practically neighbors. I'm Father Mike." He had a neatly trimmed blonde beard and a paunch that protruded slightly over the ledge of his pants.

"I'm Beth, and this is my husband, Colin."

"Pleased to meet you, Beth, Colin."

They shook hands and then edged toward the group, which had turned down another long tunnel filled with tombs. Dusty light filtered into the passageway from a high shaft. The nun's bobbing black habit was barely visible in the distance.

"This is eerie, huh?" Father Mike said.

"Uh-huh," Beth said. "I wonder if anyone ever gets lost in here."

He winked at her. "We've got to keep an eye on each other."

"That's right." Beth smiled, startled.

"Are you Catholic, Beth?" he asked.

"I am," she said. "Colin's ... he's not." She turned to look at her husband.

Colin was sliding his hand into one of the open tombs - a tiny one, baby-sized. His fingertips moved over the pocked stone as if he were reading Braille.

Father Mike looked from Colin to Beth. "The Lord can be a great comfort, can He not, Beth?" he said.

Beth nodded, her eyes filling with tears.

"He will never abandon us," the priest said, and then moved ahead, disappearing around a corner after the group.

Now both of Colin's arms were inside the tomb, and his face peered in, too, like someone sticking his head in a freezer on a hot day.

"Colin?" Beth said.

His head came out and he looked at her. "Go ahead," he said flatly. "Run along with your priest."

Beth's mouth went dry. "Goddamn you," she said, lunging at Colin, yanking his arms out of the tomb. She pressed him against the wall and kissed him so hard and clumsily that their teeth knocked together.

Colin's head fell back against the ledge of the tomb. "No," Beth said. She lifted his arms and pinned them against the wall. Bracing her foot on the bottom tomb, she pressed her thigh against his leg and leaned in to kiss him again. Colin looked away and pursed his lips like a child refusing food.

"Come on," Beth said, squeezing his wrists tighter, rubbing her torso against his. The question she had wanted to ask him months ago came to her: *What's healthy?* But Beth had known all along what healthy was. It was Colin who had forgotten; he had forgotten all about her. She pushed against him, her hands shifting, scraping his wrists against the stone.

"Beth, what are you doing?" Colin whispered.

*I'm raping you*, she thought, amazed, for until then she had not known what she was doing. She wondered if she were capable of such a thing, and decided that she was. Colin would not stop her -- he did not care enough to stop her. It would mean nothing to him. Anyone could take what they liked from him and he wouldn't say a word.

As she felt between his legs, Beth caught sight of her husband's face. Colin looked like the statue of a martyr, his head reclining against the tomb, eyes rolling up at her, jaw slack. His eyes grew wet as he gazed at her.

Beth let out a soft cry, her hand rising to cover her mouth. She backed against the opposite wall of tombs and closed her eyes. Aside from her quick, shallow breaths, there was no sound at all in the tunnel. She imagined the tour group reaching the end of the dim maze, trudging behind the nun up a steep staircase, their faces tilted toward the sunlight. She wondered, with interest but not worry, how she and Colin would find their way out. It seemed unlikely to her that they ever would.

Intent on her thoughts, Beth barely noticed Colin's hand grazing her shoulder. She wasn't sure the touch had been real until he reached for her again. Even then, Beth waited, her eyes still closed, while Colin's hands traveled over her in steady pulses of pressure, tentative and slow, as if he were groping in the dark for something small, precious, and infinitely delicate.